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SUBJECT: CRISIS FAINTLY BOOSTS PRESS FREEDOM; PUBLIC SNOOZES

¶1. (SBU) Summary: Criticism of GOR policy in some print and internet media has sharpened as the financial crisis has taken hold. This has raised hopes among some liberal observers that the financial crisis will improve press freedom in Russia, by forcing GOR officials to be more open to criticism as a hedge against popular discontent. Criticism of the GOR comes from largely the same sources as it did pre-crisis, and liberal stories are aimed at a small audience of highly-educated readers who lack the ability to influence GOR policy. Outside of elite groups concentrated in large cities, Russians largely continue to ignore political issues in favor of stories about business, entertainment, or sports, and they continue to derive the majority of their information from state-run television. Prospects for the media to perform their traditional duty of holding government accountable on behalf of an active, educated citizenry remain small. The financial straits imposed on media entities by the crisis may ironically help press freedom by severing their ties to "sponsors," and thus rendering them more independent. End Summary.

Criticism in print and internet media; none on TV  
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¶2. (SBU) As the financial crisis has deepened, criticism of the GOR in print and Internet media has sharpened. In addition to obvious examples such as Novaya Gazeta and the New Times, three staid, respected dailies -- Kommersant, Vedomosti, and Nezavisimaya Gazeta -- have consistently and explicitly criticized the GOR for, among other things, preventing opposition marches, the Khodorkovskiy trial, and GOR handling of the March mayoral elections in Sochi. Vedomosti, which is published in conjunction with the Wall Street Journal, has printed articles written by Khodorkovskiy; Kommersant praised the most recent U.S. Human Rights Report which took Russia to task for a variety of rights abuses; and Nezavisimaya Gazeta -- whose owner, Konstantin Remchukov, is a former member of the Union of Right Forces -- recently ran an editorial entitled "The Training of Responsible Citizens to be the Guarantors of the Country's Future," which calls for the formation of a genuine opposition to the government.

¶3. (SBU) The Internet also contains numerous examples of uncensored airing of views in opposition to the government or to prevailing national symbols. In perhaps the most extreme example of free rein for an oppositionist, Kremlin irritant Valeriya Novodvorskaya wrote on May 8, in response to the State Duma proposal to criminalize the questioning of the Soviet World War II victory, that the Western allies should have defeated Stalin along with Hitler. (Note: Novodvorskaya has not always escaped Kremlin wrath in the past; in August 2008, Ekho Moskv removed her from their rolls under GOR pressure after she defended the actions of the terrorist Shamil Basayev. End Note.) The website that published this posting, grani.ru, contains daily examples of anti-GOR vitriol, but thus far has received no adverse reaction from the authorities. The same may also be said for other independent websites, such as gazeta.ru; the websites of

well-known rights defenders such as Memorial, Oleg Panfilov's Center for Journalism in Extreme Situations, or Human Rights Watch; or even Khodkovskiy's website.

14. (SBU) Broadcast media, however, from which most Russians get their news, have largely remained tightly controlled during the financial crisis, with brief reports parroting the party line, and an emphasis on bland entertainment. Independent journalist and human rights activist Svetlana Sorokina told us May 19 that she sees such entertainment as specifically designed to distract viewers from social and economic problems. She added that she considered the radio station Ekho Moskvyy and occasional investigative reports on REN-TV -- an independent channel that only appears in major cities -- to be tiny drops in an ocean of otherwise compliant broadcast media.

Most Russians ignore political issues  
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15. (SBU) Even as criticism of the GOR has sharpened, most Russians continue to show little interest in political issues, favoring instead stories about business, entertainment, or sports. As the quantity of information has increased, the quality has decreased. Sorokina said that readers and viewers are drawn to "yellow" journalism and tabloids over substantive news reporting. Government accountability has morphed into interest in scandals about the personal lives of public figures, and only "sanctioned scandals" touch upon any political figures. Sorokina also noted that, as Russians have done historically, many still follow the model of the "good tsar and the bad boyars,"

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leaving some people beyond criticism. Broadcast media have repeatedly portrayed Putin personally "solving" economic problems around the country. As Sorokina noted, it is a common tactic for politicians in any country to define an attack on them as an attack on the country. In Russia, however, Sorokina calls it "the eternal story."

16. (SBU) Although all of the necessary information for an active populace holding its government accountable is there for the taking among some newspapers and websites, few Russians are interested. Expressing a commonly held view among media commentators, Oleg Panfilov told us May 13 that questions about censorship in Russia are "pointless," because an authoritarian government does not need censorship in a country where people "do not know how to live like free people." He noted that Kommersant prints only 300,000 copies in a country of 141 million people, and therefore that is was logical that "Putin went after TV first." (Note: Senior Kommersant correspondent Andrey Kozenko told us June 5 that at the time of perestroika, Kommersant issued 1 million copies, but that "yellow" publications had taken Kommersant's market share. End Note.) Panfilov related a joke he had heard in which one activist says, "We must change the government!", and the other responds, "No -- We need to change the population." In a June 2 conversation, Andrey Rikhter of the Center for Media and Law Policy agreed that thus far, the public has depended on television information as much as it did before the crisis -- "it is cheap, simple, and graphic." Kozenko told us that he had noticed an increase of 20 or 30 percent in "hits" on politically provocative stories on his paper's website, and added that his father, who runs an opposition paper in Saratov, reported a recent significant increase in sales. However, few examples of this change in reader/viewer interest have emerged.

The five percent solution  
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17. (SBU) Given that GOR criticism thus comes from largely the same sources as it did pre-crisis, and given the high level of apolitical sentiment among the Russian populace, it

follows that liberal stories are aimed at a small audience of highly-educated readers who lack the ability to influence GOR policy. Kozenko acknowledged that his elite readership generally has pre-formed political opinions which it expects to see reflected in Kommersant's articles. Panfilov asserted that allowing freedom in print and Internet media neatly fits with the Kremlin's political needs; people who gain their news from these two types of media never exceed five percent, which as it happens is below the seven percent barrier (under proposal to be reduced to five) that a party must overcome to achieve Duma representation. He acknowledged that Internet access in Russia is approximately 25 percent (by some measures, 30 percent), but said that most people are not using it to learn any political information; if one looks at the number of hits on gazeta.ru, he said, it stays within the aforementioned boundary of five percent. (Note: Medvedev recently floated a proposal to decrease the Duma barrier even further, to three percent; but the proposal is still in its fledgling stage, and would encounter huge resistance from the dominant United Russia party. End note.)

#### More journalists under threat

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18. (SBU) As pundits examine the prospects for media freedom, instances of individual journalists under threat continue. Kozenko told us that local papers vary widely in their coverage, with a number of papers freely criticizing local authorities and uncovering corruption; instances of violence happen more rarely, but are egregious enough to capture international attention when they do take place. Nonetheless, according to Panfilov's latest data through May 31, so far in 2009 17 journalists have been beaten and/or physically attacked, one has been killed, 17 have been arrested, and 226 court cases have been opened against them. While print and Internet media remain by and large uncensored, press freedom advocates nervously keep an eye on GOR policy, noting the occasional suppression of an independent voice. On June 2, Volgograd reporter Yelena Maglevannaya requested political asylum in Finland after an article she wrote for the opposition paper Svobodnoye Slovo ("Free Word"), in which she quoted a Chechen man's allegations that he was tortured in a local prison, earned her unwelcome attention from both the GOR and from an extreme nationalist group who advocated her murder on their website. A court ordered her to publish a retraction, and her refusal to do so could land her in prison for up to two years.

19. (SBU) In March, blogger Dmitry Solovyev, a member of the  
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opposition movement "Oborona," was charged with inciting hatred and "denigrating human dignity" after he questioned the basis for the constitutional structure of the government and state security. Several days after the Solovyev case, a working group in the State Duma announced proposed amendments to the media law giving the GOR greater control over Internet media. Similar endeavors in the past have not moved forward; however, the issue is likely to come to a head by January 1, 2010, when the proposed amendments would come into force.

#### No Money, No Problems?

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110. (SBU) One area in which the crisis may ironically help press freedom is in affording journalists greater independence. People commonly assume that the crisis will deal a devastating blow to the already tenuous budgets of independent media dependent on a dwindling customer base or donors' largess. However, some of our contacts believe that independent media can flourish in an arid financial environment. Rikhter told us June 2 that in his view, the financial difficulties brought on by the crisis might, in itself, be a catalyst for positive change. Rikhter acknowledged that his "grand idea" needs to be proven. Nonetheless, he argued that the crisis will bring a "golden

age" for Russian journalism by forcing newspapers and magazines that depend on government or business "sponsors" to fall back on their own means of survival, thus allowing greater freedom in their editorial policy. Kozenkov agreed, adding that if sponsors become financially weak, they will stop "corrupting" journalists who mostly depend today on the likes and dislikes of the sponsors, rather than those of their readers/viewers/listeners.

Comment

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11. (SBU) Public apathy and avoidance of political issues remain a fact of life in Russia, largely undisturbed by the financial crisis. Our contacts uniformly tell us, however, that they are impressed by the level of flexibility, curiosity, and open-minded thinking among the young people with whom they interact. Since vast numbers of young Russians take advantage of the modern freedom of travel to visit the U.S. and other Western countries every year, it would be impossible to completely control the information to which people have access. The biggest problem with information flow in Russia appears to be the public's lack of interest in that information, meaning that a change in this trend commensurate with this exposure to foreign cultures appears the most likely way in which problems of "freedom of the press" will improve.

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